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## **Pact Averts New Hostilities in Water Wars Calfed, a 6-year-old effort at compromise, appeared to be unraveling until late-night meetings produced results.**

By Nancy Vogel, staff writer

SACRAMENTO--Last week's landmark agreement on how to solve California's worst water woes arrived just in time to revive the nation's most ambitious effort to use consensus, not the courts, to solve tough natural resource dilemmas.

"We have now established a new culture," said U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt on Friday on the steps of the Capitol, where dozens of experts who are paid to fight over the division of California's water among farms, fish and kitchen faucets stood in rare agreement.

In uniting behind a plan forged in late-night meetings by top advisors to Babbitt and Gov. Gray Davis, the traditional water warriors kept alive a 6-year-old federal and state coalition called Calfed that sought to find common ground.

In recent months, it was getting to be known as "Calfail."

"We were facing the abyss," said David Hayes, deputy Interior secretary and key negotiator. "The patience level of folks with the Calfed process had really frayed. The cease-fire was about to be lifted."

The attempt at collaboration through Calfed came only after four decades of legal and political battles over the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, whose rivers are economically and ecologically critical to California. The document released Friday seemed to re-energize environmentalists, farmers and city water officials weary of endless meetings and studies. Many credit Davis and Babbitt with sensing that everyone who had put faith in Calfed needed bold decisions--fast.

"Consensus-building couldn't go any further," said Babbitt, who has made repeated visits to California to keep Calfed on track. The only effort comparable, he said, is in southern Florida's Everglades, where the federal government is weighing an \$8-billion plan to restore wetlands and improve farm and city water supplies.

The plan unveiled Friday is the summary of what Calfed leaders expect to adopt in a legally binding document in July. Individual projects within the plan, such as the raising of dams, still face years of regulatory review.

Calfed is expected to last 30 years and cost more than \$10 billion in tax dollars and water fees. It was launched in 1994 to make the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta work better as both California's chief wellspring and a major migration path for 10,000-year-old species of salmon.

Political and regulatory fighting over the Delta erupted in the 1970s when biologists began to connect the decimation of native fish to heavy pumping by government water projects serving Southern California. Battles have flared in Congress, courts, the Capitol and assorted federal and state agencies. All worsened in the late 1980s when a drought hit, and several species were deemed to be threatened with extinction. Water supplies to farms and cities were disrupted for the sake of fish.

Finally, in 1994, warring parties agreed to seek ways to bolster fish populations and stabilize the water deliveries upon which so much of the state depends.

"There are analogues," Babbitt said of the compromise, "but there aren't precedents."

When federal and state leaders launched Calfed six years ago, they figured that water users and environmentalists locked in the same rooms for thousands of hours of meetings would reach their own solutions to Delta problems.

That didn't happen. Instead, the Calfed talks began to lose traction.

"It just got too complex," said Felicia Marcus, regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "When it came down to what do we do, it was too hard for them. It's a quantum leap from the dinner-party discussions of the perfect world to what the hell do we do now?"

So the leaders of the 14 different federal and state agencies folded

under Calfed emptied the meeting rooms of the so-called "stakeholders" and hammered out a plan.

"We said, this is what we heard over the years from you," said Marcus, "and now this is what we're going to do."

On Friday, Davis laid out a detailed road map for Calfed's next seven years as "the largest and most comprehensive water program in the world." The \$8-billion plan calls for the expansion of several reservoirs, billion-dollar investments in water conservation, a \$35-million annual water user tax to be imposed by the Legislature, destruction of some small Northern California dams and restoration of wetlands.

It also calls for study of where to build new pipes and pumps to add flexibility to a sprawling plumbing system that shifts water hundreds of miles from Redding to Bakersfield, with the Delta at its heart.

"It requires everyone to share in the sacrifice in order to share in the progress," Davis said.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, credited with helping to forge the agreement, said the occasion "is the first time in seven years I can say I'm optimistic California has a chance to solve her water problems."

Environmentalists say the new plan includes too much construction and dam expansion, which they call an ecologically hazardous throwback to California's historic approach to expanding its water supplies.

But they are pleased by the plan's heavy investment through grants to local governments in such water-saving tools as low-flush toilets. Farmers, who use nearly 80% of California's water, say they would like to see new dams built soon, but are satisfied that expansion of existing lakes will help keep their canals full.

Southern California water providers say they are most concerned about high salt levels in Delta water, which limits their ability to reuse the water. The Calfed plan does not include a "peripheral canal" to draw cleaner Sacramento River water around the tidally influenced Delta, but it contains enough other measures and promises to satisfy the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said general manager Ronald R. Gastelum, whose agency sells water to serve 17 million people.

"We feel good about this because I think we've succeeded in putting water quality co-equal as a Calfed concern with water supply," he said.